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Of traffic and turnpike trusts

By F. M. L. Thompson

W. J. READER:

Macadam: The Macadam Family and the Turnpike Roads, 1798-1861. 288pp. Heinemann, £8.95. 0 434 62502 7.

It might be admitted that roads lack instant appeal. They have always attracted, and continue to attract, complaints about their neglected condition, their inadequacy, and their cost, and a diligent search would be needed to discover much in the way of favourable comment on their strength and beauty. It is true that road vehicles, preferably motor, or at least, have their admirers, but these have a lovely place in the nostalgic league alongside steam trains, while the sense of romance and adventure is reserved almost entirely for railways, lines and canals.

Their praises may have gone unsung, yet, as historians have begun to realize, the roads carried traffic which grew substantially and often rapidly, at least from the early seventeenth century onwards, traffic that was vital to economic and social life. It grew as inland waterways flourished because water and road were serving distinct markets for the long-distance transport of people and goods, with each mode having its own advantages of cost, speed, or flexibility; it grew right through the railway age, because road transport adapted to a complementary, non-competing, feeder role for the railways with which it could not compete over distances; and it goes without saying that it has grown at immense speed in the age of the automobile.

Throughout this long period, until the construction of the first motorway in this country in the 1930s, the predominant tendency was to try to make the traffic fit the existing roads, by regulation of the

size and design of wheels, by taxation policy, by parking regulations, and by traffic engineering. There was one short interlude, in the early nineteenth century, when a few shrewd and determined people turned things upside down and tried to make the roads fit for the existing traffic, an interlude that produced a rare outbreak of enthusiastic comment from French and German travellers, who could hardly find the superlatives to express their admiration of the best roads in the world, magnificent smooth highways along which multi-coaches whizzed "silently and without any vibration" and with exemplary punctuality. It is about this interlude that W. J. Reader has written, in his business biography of the Macadam family.

John Loudon Macadam came to the roads late in life, at the age of sixty, after a successful career in the mercantile world in colonial New York and then as a businessman in Scotland, engaged in distilling turpentine from ship's bottoms, not in turpentine, which came a full century later, recognizing by its name the contribution he had made both to the English language and to the techniques of road-making.

He had no particular reason for embarking on his third career, which brought him eminence and affluence, apart from a Scotsman's natural belief that ineffective and incompetent road repairs were a scandalous waste of the travelling public's money, and a single-minded conviction of his own superiority that he had discovered the one true way of making acceptable and durable road surfaces. Unhindered confidence in his own abilities and indispensability, by no means entirely unwarranted, rapidly carried him to the top in a sphere of semi-public administration so ill-considered and so peopled with amateur bumble-heads that such an ascent was not difficult. It made him into a rarely questioned authority, and enabled him to set up his own road-making company, the new profession of road surveyor. It was not Macadam's fault that this turned almost as rapidly into a dead-end

profession, sliding into fifty years of oblivion as the main roads themselves slid into an inferior or non-existent role in the transport system of the railway age.

It is perhaps surprising that a figure so renowned in his day should have left behind him a full-length study, and been supplanted by a better than a garbled and inaccurate DNB entry. Mr Reader modestly claims that the reason for this oversight is that roads vanished from the public gaze soon after Macadam's death, and hence that he was quickly forgotten. "This will hardly do when educated Englishmen could be assumed to know what words like macadam and macadamized meant, and when, as this book points out, the road-building industry in 1905 was expected to understand a comment that 'the main principles which the famous Macadam [sic] taught' had been abandoned. The real reason is that the sources for biography are limited to the minutes of turnpike trusts and the evidence given in a parliamentary committee considering Macadam's claim for a reward for his services to the public, and it requires someone of Mr Reader's skill and erudition to make a lively and attractive account out of such unappealing materials.

This he contrives to do, delightfully extending the last drop of juice from these inherently dry, impersonal, and limited records, so that Macadam comes more than half alive as an individual. Only the last twenty years of his life, known about his first sixty years and even the bare facts of how he had spent those years suppressed or blurred in the account he gave of his own life to the turnpike trustees in 1853. As for his private life, the records are virtually silent, although his class-consciousness comes out in the way in which he advanced his sons and grandsons, both because he was a naturalist to look to them as a family tradition, and because it was natural for the head of a family to look after his own. What emerges is not a very likable character: full

of drive and vigour—he held surveyorships to eighteen separate turnpike trusts between 1816 and his death in 1836, and married his second wife, who was thirty years younger than himself, at the age of seventy-one—he was determined, autocratic, pleased with himself, resentful of criticism, not a little grasping and contemptuous of traditional highway administrators. Just the sort of man to get things done.

It is as a business historian that Reader tells us what Macadam did for him and he throws in for good measure a welcome if a brief account of the work of Macadam's most successful son, James, who amassed sixty-four surveyorships and a knighthood for his services as general surveyor in the most important road authority of the time, the newly-formed Commission for the Metropolitan Turnpike Roads North of the Thames, which in 1826 placed 131 miles of the busiest roads in the world, previously operated by sixteen independent trusts, under unified management. The account of the basic road-making technique for macadamizing—laying a foot-thick bed of small angular stones, evenly sized and more larger than a walnut, to be consolidated into a smooth, durable surface simply by the passage of traffic—brings out splendidly the pedantic quality in Macadam's attention to detail in his instances that it was quite impossible for stone-breakers to break stones to the required smallness and uniformly unless they worked sitting down and used short-handled hammers; on erect stone-breaker wielding a sledgehammer was liable to find himself without a job.

The main message of the book, however, is to emphasize the managerial content of the "Macadam system", whose adoption was not a failure, nor a success, to every trust that consulted the great man.

This, with its insistence on the employment of a full-time, dedicated, professional surveyor by every trust, the subdivision of large trusts into properly defined sub-districts with sub-surveyors, and the direct employment and close supervision of all road labour, involving the ending of the traditional system of subcontracting road work, was undoubtedly the secret of success. Macadam, after all, was not an engineer, he did not construct new roads or build magnificent bridges like Telford; but he was a great administrator, and it is right to lay stress on the rigour and efficiency of his methods of road management.

The patterns of landscape

By E. M. J. Campbell

P. D. A. HARVEY:

The History of Topographical Maps 1890pp. Thames and Hudson, £15. 0 500 24105 8

The title of P. D. A. Harvey's book is misleading. It suggests that this is a history of the topographical map, whereas, as he makes clear in the first sentence of his introduction, it is really "about the early development of topography as a discipline, by which means produced before the end of the sixteenth century; and he looks back in time to the third millennium BC. There are also occasional references to cartographic delineations after the sixteenth century AD.

The shorter Oxford English Dictionary's first definition of topography (dating from 1549) defines it as "the science or practice of describing a particular place, city, town, manor, parish, or tract of land." Professor Harvey's definition of a topographical map is as broad. For him it is "a large-scale map, one that sets out to convey the shape and pattern of a landscape, showing a tiny portion of the earth's surface as it lies within one's own direct experience, and quite distinct from the small-scale maps that show 'the features of wide provinces, nations and continents'." For him, topographical mapping seems also to be synonymous with local mapping (page 7) and he includes town-plans, estate maps and road-books within his study.

Professor Harvey is a historian. Cartographers and geographers generally use the term "topographical map" in a more limited sense to the exclusion of such items as: for them "a topographical map is one constructed upon a scale sufficiently large to admit of the representation not only of all identifiable objects situated upon the

Earth's surface but likewise of its inequalities," the definition first given in English in 1822 by William Sihora (a lieutenant in the British army). The modern topographical map is first discernible in a century—a century of almost continuous warfare on a continental scale in mainland Europe and one in which military commanders needed detailed maps for the movement and quartering of their troops.

The design of a topographical map was a response to military necessity and was essentially the work of military engineers and surveyors. Harvey's book also has a sub-title: "symbols, pictures and surveys" and these three words indicate the strands in the "early" history of topographical mapping taken in his broad sense. Indeed they form the titles of the three parts into which his book is divided: Part 1, Symbols; Part 2, Pictures (including early town-plans, bird-eye views, and picture-maps, the last including developments in medieval Europe, the Far East, Mexico and India); Part 3, Surveys. This arrangement causes him examples in more than one part of his book.

The book is "addressed to two audiences," to the non-specialist general reader, and to the specialist on the other. Harvey describes his work as "essentially an essay in interpretation, not a work of primary research, and as he does not footnote his references but, at the end, he lists, in just over four triple-columned pages, the authorities he has consulted. As fits a book published by Thames and Hudson, it is amply illustrated, with ten colour plates and 106 monochrome ones—some of the illustrations are reproduced for the first time in a general history of this kind.

Harvey ranges widely in his discussion of the early development of local mapping, including the "cartographic" efforts of unimproved

peoples such as American Indians, Eskimos, and those of more advanced societies such as Babylon, Classical Greece and Rome, ancient China and feudal Japan. It is difficult to pinpoint innovation or even more difficult to trace the diffusion of a concept, such as the use of the compass, but Harvey believes, for example, that the use of the compass in the continuity in outline and local mapping in Western Christendom from the Roman period to the nineteenth century AD. The fact that little if no work was done on the subject of the compass does not necessarily mean that none was produced.

Harvey's volume is one to be dipped into rather than read at a single sitting. It is packed full of facts, and the "general reader" may well find it a little indigestible unless he mulls it over carefully. The book is a scintilla of information, a "hot line" to the author as that he might discuss with him many of his interpretations. The book contains many generalizations which need qualification, such as "the beginning of the sixteenth century 'mapping' was the work of the artist, by the end of the century it had passed into the hands of the surveyor." Each of these generalizations has different functions; the artist's skill to draw a topographical map, even an imperfectly surveyed one. Or again when, nearly at the end of his book (page 172) Harvey asks "just what, after all, is a map?" and goes on to write "until this emergence of the surveyed map, drawn or intended to be drawn) to a uniform scale, there was no such thing as a topographical map. What we have done in this book is to call these representations of landscape 'topographical maps' in a line of development (typological, not necessarily historical) leading to the real topographical map."

But still, Professor Harvey is to be congratulated on telling a well-known story in a fresh and essentially individual way.

Vitreous matter

By R. J. Hunter

RUTH HURST VOSE: Glass. 221pp. Collins £12.95. 0 00 211379 1

Traditionally, works on glass have been aimed at the specialist reader as collector, historian or technologist, and a good general work on the different aspects of glass has been long overdue. The balance is a difficult one to achieve, but Ruth Hurst Vose has met with a reasonable degree of success. Glass is packed with facts and includes a helpful glossary of terms for the uninitiated. The first five chapters cover the definition of glass and the origins of glass-making, and examine the evolution of glass-making in Britain and on the Continent from earliest times until the twentieth century. The interested general reader for whom the book is intended is offered a deluge of information, some of it perhaps expressed too succinctly. In addition to which, several chapters overlap in covering the history and evolution of glass-making and this may at times be confusing.

But Glass provides an excellent background to the subject. There are useful sections on early techniques and methods and on the production of coloured glasses. Raw materials are examined in some detail although the change to "fused" glasses, which are now beginning to displace, would have been given more attention. Early texts from the

At the same time, if a whole book is devoted to this subject, it is unfortunate that a business historian's understandable preoccupation with the application of business management to highway maintenance should have been allowed to crowd out quite a completely the questions which interest economic, social, and technological historians. Thus, while there is discussion of the finances of individual turnpike trusts, showing that some part of Macadam's economies consisted of asset-stripping (for a while he disposed with purchasing new supplies of road materials by digging up the existing roads, breaking down the large stones to the right size, and re-using them), there is no extended discussion of the relation of the turnpike roads to the eighty per cent of national road mileage that remained unpaved, nor any real evaluation of the benefits in the tracing public of macadamized turnpikes.

Did the public get cheaper, as well as faster, travel, or were the advantages taken out in the improved ratios between receipts from tolls and operating expenses? And in their improved chances of paying off accumulated debt, in comparison with turnpikes which remained un-macadamized? Traffic needs, particularly those of the Post Office, with its interest in speeding up the mail, provided the demand for better road surfaces, and it would be interesting to know whether, anticipating the modern motorways, the improved roads generated fresh traffic to occupy the enhanced capacity, and whether traffic grew more rapidly on macadamized than on non-macadamized roads. Historians of technology might usefully have been reminded that Sweden developed macadamized roads without benefit of Macadam some years before he launched his system; they would certainly welcome a more probing examination of Telford's criticism of Macadam's land assurance that no foundations of any sort were needed for his layer of small stones—some impression of how Macadam's roads looked after half a century of neglect, but also half a century without much traffic, as compared with Telford's own roads, might be a startling point.

All in all, this is a good book and a readable one, but not quite wide enough in its approach to include an indispensable reading for students of the period unless they have a specialized interest in the history of road transport.

This is brought out particularly in Chapter 6, which examines the archaeological evidence in Britain. Here the evidence for the earlier periods is sparse, but it could have been balanced by a more detailed investigation of those glass types which are of particular interest to archaeologists. Glass-working, as opposed to glass-making, is covered briefly but the possibility of working sites in the ill-thought-out Dark Ages could have been brought out more fully, to emphasize a different aspect of the early "industry". There is a section on Venetian glass and foreign influences, are reasonably full although space is given in the later periods possibly at the expense of the Roman and early medieval periods, where the coverage is thinner.

Mesopotamian tablets, through Theophrastus to Nori, act as much as the book's size allows and there is also a relatively detailed coverage of English and Continental late medieval and early modern glass-making, which is clearly the author's specialist field. The section on Venetian glass and foreign influences, are reasonably full although space is given in the later periods possibly at the expense of the Roman and early medieval periods, where the coverage is thinner.

